THE UPSIDE DOWN TREE OF THE
BHAGAVADGĪṬĀ CH. XV

An Exegesis

BY

J. G. ARAPURA
McMaster University, Hamilton, Canada

_translation:

They say that there is an indestructible aśvattha tree with roots above and branches below, whose leaves are the Vedic hymns: who knows it is a knower of the Veda.

Its branches spread below and above, being nourished by the guṇas (i.e., the strands that constitute Prakṛti or Nature), objects of perception being its twigs. Its [adventitious] roots are produced below, in the world of man, bound to karma.

Its form is not obtained here as thus [or thus], nor its end, nor its beginning nor the ground [on which it is planted], once this aśvattha tree so well nourished [though it is], has been cut down with the mighty sword of non-attachment.

_Numen, Vol. XXII, Fasc. 2_
The question is, although the aśvattha, described here is the “Cosmic Tree”, as all interpreters, both ancient and modern, agree, in what sense is it that? Is it in the ordinary sense of the visible universe only or perhaps in that sense, no doubt, plus in the sense of something more fundamental, that subtle human world which pervades the visible universe, tasted and felt in consciousness in the form of temperality, death, rebirth, etc., for which the word saṁsāra stands?

The symbol of the aśvattha calls for an exegesis. Parallels with the Cosmic Tree in other parts of the world known to us through the history of religion can mislead one into thinking that the Gitā is talking about the visible universe, its creation, implying the creator behind it, etc. The context of our exegetical effort here is some statements by R. C. Zaehner, which reveal a profound misunderstanding. Prof. Zaehner seeks to counter-balance the Cosmic Tree with the belief in one God, Viṣṇu-Kṛṣṇa, which he sees to be the essence of the Gitā teaching anyway! So he believes that here “the disciple is first asked to cut down the Tree of primordial creativity (pravṛtti) and then asked to take refuge in the very author of that Tree, ‘from whom all things proceed (pravartate)’ (10.8)” He also sees this as an important example of “mystical religion”, as he adds, “this is, however, typical of mystical religion, and the Muslim mystic, for instance takes refuge in God’s mercy against his wrath. In Hinduism it is not the divine wrath that hides the eternal from the eyes of the worshipper but his ‘divine māyā’ (7.14), his creative activity which conceals the timeless peace which is ‘his changeless [all] highest’ mode of his being (7.24)”.

Etymology of the word aśvattha

In the Atharva-VEDA there are references (5.4.3; 19.39.6) to the aśvattha being the home of the gods and being in the third heavenly sphere, viz., the Varuṇa-loka. The Taittiriya Brāhmaṇa (3.8.12.2) says “the tree is called aśvattha because Agni or Yajna-Prajāpati fell from the sphere of the gods (i.e., the Deva-loka) during the pīṭṛyāna (i.e., the path of the fathers), and taking the form of a horse (aśva)

2) aśvattho devasudamām triṁśayam iti tatrāmṛtyasya caṇḍanam devāḥ kuṣṭham anvataḥ (The aśvattha tree is an abode of the gods; it grows in the third heaven; this tree which confers immortality was acquired by the gods.)